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Reflections on the Czech Election

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This is part of our special feature on **Nationalism, Nativism, and the Revolt Against Globalization.** ^[1]

In the last week of January 2018, in the second round of the Czech Presidential election (the President of the Czech Republic is elected directly by the voters at the ballot box), the vote was won by the incumbent, the 73-year-old former Social Democrat and reformist economist, now an extreme right-wing populist, Miloš Zeman.¹ ^[2]

Zeman's victory is a sign of the emergence of politics of parasitism as a mainstream political strategy within Central Europe in general, and the Czech Republic in particular. Both Miloš Zeman and most Czech politicians have realized that in order to gain substantial political support amongst voters, they no longer need to develop strategies for the solution of many of the existing, often intractable, social problems. The only thing they need to do in order to gain influence and money is to peddle fear.

In the 1990s, Miloš Zeman was one of the founders of the reconstituted Social Democratic Party. In 2003, he was standing as a candidate for the Czech President, who was then elected by the members of the Czech Parliament. Most Social Democratic MPs and Senators decided to vote against him at that time. As a result, Zeman failed to win the presidential election and was forced temporarily to retire from politics. He decided that the Social Democratic Party had betrayed him and vowed to revenge himself. Over time, he has managed to do this with spectacular success – at the moment, the Czech Social Democratic Party, once a major national political power, is in almost terminal decline. In the general election which took place in October 2017, the Social Democrats received a mere 7.27 per cent of the vote² ^[3] and their electoral support has been slipping since.

The institute of the direct election of the Czech President was introduced in 2013. This has given Zeman, a shrewd manipulator, a unique opportunity to gain electoral support by adopting openly populist views. Using these, reinventing himself as a defender of the "interests of the Czech nation" and "the ordinary voter," he started using the politics of fear, zooming in on issues which have always been worrying most Czech voters. Zeman invented the Trumpian approach to politics long before Donald Trump. The 2013 presidential election was won by Zeman primarily because he made many Czech voters afraid of the allegedly resurgent influence of the Sudeten Germans, who had been expelled from Czechoslovakia after 1945. They could now come back and reclaim the Czechs' property in the Sudeten regions. He managed to smear his then opponent in the presidential campaign, the right-of-center candidate Karel Schwarzenberg, a native German speaker, by arguing he was a Trojan horse for the Sudeten Germans.

As political scientist Jiří Pehe points out,³ ^[4] Czech politicians including Zeman, have always used the image of an enemy to mobilize support for themselves. Apart from being afraid of the Sudeten Germans, many Czechs have always regarded the Roma minority in the Czech Republic with hostility, and Czech politicians have often mobilized the population against the "maladjusted," "inadaptable" (*nepřizpůsobiví*) Roma population.

But the 2015 European refugee crisis and a spate of terrorist attacks in Europe came as a godsend to Czech politicians. Miloš Zeman as Czech President immediately assumed the position of a "defender" of the Czech nation against the "muslim murderers" and against the "Muslim invasion into Europe" which is being "deliberately masterminded and organized." On the anniversary of the Czech 1989 democratic revolution, on November 17, 2015, Zeman even appeared on a stage, singing the Czech national anthem together with Martin Konvička, an extremist islamophobe who has demanded the gassing of muslims.⁴ ^[5] In the past three years, Zeman's pronouncements against refugees have become ever more strident and ever more embarrassing. He became famous, for instance, for this statement:

"Unfaithful women will be stoned, thieves' hands will be cut off and we will be deprived of the beauty of women because they will have to have their faces covered. I can imagine that in some cases this might be beneficial, though."

Zeman has spoken of Islamic "anti-civilization, which is financed from the sale of oil and drugs."⁵
[6] Just as it was necessary to fight against Nazism with all Europe's might, similarly, Europe must now join forces to fight against an Islamic invasion whose aim it is to conquer Europe and to destroy its Christian civilization. The Islamic invasion of Europe, according to Zeman, is masterminded from abroad.

Zeman has been extremely successful in equating all forms of terrorism with Islam. He has managed to create the conviction in the minds of most Czechs that whoever is a Muslim is automatically a terrorist. In creating this irrational, fearful mythology, he has been greatly helped by the fact that there are very few Muslims living in the Czech Republic and most Czechs have never actually met a Muslim. It is thus very easy to create the fear of the unknown.

Since the times of the revered inter-war, Czechoslovak "President Liberator" Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937), the institute of the Czechoslovak and Czech President, has been extremely highly regarded. Thus, the post of the Czech President automatically legitimizes whoever holds it, especially if the person has been elected by a direct democratic vote.

Apart from naming the head of a new government after the elections, the Czech President has practically no powers. The only power he has is to pontificate. This is what Miloš Zeman has been doing to great effect over the past two or three years, effectively running a permanent re-election campaign for himself. He has been systematically visiting small towns all over the Czech Republic, presenting himself as a defender of the "small Czech man against the elites" (the reality is the opposite; Zeman is closely associated with brutal entrepreneurs, bailiffs, who have made their millions by confiscating property from the most vulnerable 10 percent of the Czech population, who are heavily in debt. 10 percent of the Czech population have had their properties seized and their bank accounts blocked because they cannot pay what originally were minimal debts).

The main argument in Zeman's campaign is the danger of terrorism from Muslims, refugees, and foreigners. Zeman has ignored the problems of Czech society, or, if he has mentioned them at all, he has made various extreme right-wing pronouncements (like that social welfare should be taken away from people "who do not want to work," meaning the Roma, or that "pensioners can well afford to make payments for their visits at the doctor's"). But, primarily, he has been systematically and repeatedly warning against the so-called Muslim invasion of Europe. These statements, legitimized by the Presidential Office, have permeated through Czech society to such an incredible degree that most Czechs are now genuinely and deeply afraid of any Muslim or refugee. Czech social networks are full of endless debates of alleged Muslim terrorism, conducted by individuals who have never met a Muslim in their lives. Zeman has also been making statements in support of Czech nativism, which have been taken up with great enthusiasm by nativist groups on social networks.

It was primarily Zeman who has capitalized greatly on the parasitical possibilities of populist politics, by constantly highlighting the non-existent danger of refugees and Muslims. All Czech

political parties have, however, jumped on this bandwagon, once they have realized how beneficial for them this is. All the Czech political parties (perhaps with the exception of the Greens, who have an absolutely minimal role in Czech society) are now using the fear of Muslims and refugees as an instrument of strengthening their power. The same instrument is being used by the commercial media who have discovered that alarmist news sells and makes profits. Although there are articles in the Czech criminal code, according to which hatred against minorities and religions must be punished by prison terms, no one is prosecuting the authors of the many violent comments, which are being constantly published in the press and on social networks. *Parlamentní listy*,⁶ ^[7] a Breitbart-like Czech language website specializing in fake news, is in the forefront of spreading anti-Muslim and anti-refugee hatred; what is most worrying, however, is that the irrational construction about “all terrorists being Muslims” has now entered the Czech media mainstream. References to how the Czech population is afraid of the “terrorist Muslim invaders” can now be found even in works of fiction in Czech literature.

Czech literature has, over the past 500 years, always stood on the side of decency and humanity. Not even under the Nazi occupation during World War II did Czechs make a single pro-Nazi film or publish a single pro-Nazi novel. A major watershed is the publication of the first Czech openly fascist novel, *Za Alpami (Beyond the Alps)*,⁷ ^[8] an almost four-hundred page narrative, which takes place mostly in contemporary Germany and Czech Republic, and strongly legitimizes fascist views of the superiority of European races in comparison with the “marauders” from the Middle East and from Africa, which will destroy Europe if it does not defend itself. References to the fears of the Czech population of Middle Eastern and African “marauders” can be found in several other recent works of Czech literature.

And yet, the fact that the fear of Muslims and immigrants is an artificial construction only can be seen when we look at many examples from contemporary Czech politics. Take the political career of Tomio Okamura, a Czech-Japanese businessman who until recently was an activist supporting multiculturalism.⁸ ^[9] Recently, he has switched sides and become the leader of the most extreme right wing political party in the Czech Republic, the Movement for Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), thus winning 22 seats in the 200-seat Czech parliament in the Czech general election in October 2017. Jaroslav Staník, the secretary of this party, has recently called for the gassing of Muslims, gays and Roma.⁹ ^[10] Okamura¹⁰ ^[11] and his SPD now teamed up with President Zeman.¹¹ ^[12]

Let me finish with one other eloquent example documenting how the irrational hatred of refugees and Muslims has become a convenient tool for politicians in internal Czech politics. Although the populist movement ANO, headed by the oligarch Andrej Babiš, won most seats in the general election which took place in October 2017, he has not been able to form a government which would gain the confidence of the Czech Parliament. In order to be able to do so, he now needs support of the new Czech President.

When it looked briefly, before the second round of the Czech Presidential election at the end of January 2018, that Zeman’s opponent Jiří Drahoš was about to win, Babiš started making overtures to Drahoš signalling that he was willing to switch his allegiance from Zeman to Drahoš. But Drahoš, rather undiplomatically, said openly that he will not touch Babiš with a barge pole. In response to this, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, one of the most widely read newspapers in the Czech

Republic, which is owned by Babiš, published, *on the day of the Czech presidential election*, in bold letters on the front page of its issue, an article asserting that a former Prague Muslim imam is “being prosecuted by Czech police for terrorism.” ¹² ^[13] The article was bordering on fake news: the information was several months old: imam Sámer Shehadeh has not lived in the Czech Republic since October 2016. During the presidential campaign, Zeman’s supporters consistently, and mendaciously, characterized Jiří Drahoš as a “supporter of Islam and terrorism.” The publication of this particular article on the day of the presidential election in Babiš’s newspaper was a signal from Babiš to Drahoš: “You have lost this election.” The fear of Muslims and refugees has, in the Czech Republic, become a convenient tool for politicians to access power, money and influence.

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Photo: Milos Zeman, | Shutterstock

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